



AUSTRALIAN FUTURES PROJECT



Discussion Paper

# THE SYSTEM SHIFT INITIATIVE

## THE STORY OF A SOCIAL LAB SEEKING BETTER OUTCOMES FOR AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN

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July 2015

A MULTI-SECTOR, NON-PROFIT, NON-PARTISAN INITIATIVE HOSTED BY



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The objective of the Australian Futures Project is to build Australia’s capacity to make decisions for a flourishing shared future in the 2020s and 30s. The Australian Futures Project is a multi-sector, non-profit, and non-partisan initiative hosted by La Trobe University.

[www.australianfutures.org](http://www.australianfutures.org)





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

July 2015 marks the end of the third stage of the System Shift initiative. This report describes the two-and-a-half year journey that has led us to here. It has involved various stages and organisations over its life as participants have sought out ways of “building leadership and capability to work differently together to improve outcomes for Australian children”.

It has been a team effort with successes to date thanks to the support and enthusiasm shown by the Sponsor Group, funders, interviewees, retreat participants, and the many other individuals and organisations who contributed over the three stages of its life.

We’ve prepared this report in the hope that it provides inspiration not only for those interested in a System Shift in early childhood development (ECD) in Australia, but also for those considering a social lab approach to complex predicaments in other subject areas.

Section 1 provides a brief overview of the initiative, including how its design is underpinned by complex adaptive systems and social labs, and how we came to choose the topic of ECD. Sections 2 to 5 outline the three stages of the initiative. Specifically, Section 2 outlines Stage One of the initiative, including the eight “givens” that underpinned the initiative and outcomes achieved. Section 3 reviews Stage Two, including consultation with 35 decision-makers from across Australia on their perspectives of the early childhood development (ECD) system and the production of two research reports. Section 4 presents the process and findings of Stage Three. This section is the most in-depth, as findings from Stages One and Two have already been published as separate discussion papers<sup>1</sup>. It includes results from a three-day retreat held in June 2015 as well as findings on collaboration from a pre-retreat participant questionnaire.

Section 5 provides a summary of the actions participants have helped to identify over the life of the initiative. We’ve presented these actions according to actor. In brief, they are:

- ECD service providers:
  - Play well with others
  - Nurture change within the organisation
  - Create non-threatening environments
- Policy makers:
  - Adopt fit for purpose funding models
  - Ensure quality without homogenisation
  - Allow for independent oversight
  - Let evidence inform policy
- Researchers: Evaluate data for best practice
- Peak bodies: Be a choir for change

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<sup>1</sup> Australia’s Early Childhood Development system: what we know. Australian Futures Project, available at: <http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP-Early-Childhood-Development-What-We-Know-141212.pdf>

Early Childhood Development: Perspectives of the System. Interviews with 35 Australian decision-makers, available at:

<http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP-Early-Childhood-Development-System-Perspectives-141212.pdf>

Early Childhood Development in Australia: Challenging the system, [AFP Policy Brief] available at: [http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP\\_PB2\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Development\\_150521.pdf](http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP_PB2_Early_Childhood_Development_150521.pdf)



- Philanthropists: Provide room to move
- Communities: Don't wait for permission
- Parents, families, and carers: Say what you need
- Taxpayers and society-at-large:
  - Value children
  - Face the elephant

We propose these actions for further consideration and debate. This might seem like a long wish list, but if we are serious about shifting the system, then we need actions such as these – ones which have been repeatedly suggested by participants in the System Shift initiative from government, non-government, business, academia and media organisations. What would it take to achieve this? What sacred cows need slaying and what behaviours and mental models do we need to change? Some of the answers have been provided in this report and associated System Shift publications. Many solutions are behavioural rather than technical. We invite readers to consider for themselves what progress would look like and what the levers for achieving change might be. Having wish lists isn't enough. If we are to transform ECD in Australia, then we will all need to contribute. The good news is that participants at the June retreat, some of whom had never met beforehand, have already started working together on ambitious but achievable projects to make progress on one or more of these actions.

Section 6 reflects on lessons learnt during the initiative for those interested in the social lab process. This is a preliminary assessment. Many of the outcomes and lessons from the initiative won't be apparent for some time. The Australian Futures Project is working with Sponsor Group organisations to further evaluate the initiative and to monitor subsequent changes.

Stakeholders have asked the Australian Futures Project to consider supporting next steps from the System Shift initiative, recognising the enormous collective effort it took to bring together so many diverse representatives of the ECD system over two-and-a-half years, and that change takes time. We are therefore exploring whether there is demand for an ongoing role and how the initiative might evolve into a new phase. We want to know what is most needed and what will have the most impact within the ECD system. If you have specific suggestions, we invite you to contact us. Please email Fiona McKenzie, Policy Director, Australian Futures Project: [fiona@australianfutures.org](mailto:fiona@australianfutures.org).



# 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE SYSTEM SHIFT INITIATIVE

## 1.1 ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN FUTURES PROJECT

The Australian Futures Project was established in late 2012 with the objective of building Australia's capacity to make decisions for a flourishing shared future in the 2020s and '30s. We are about making long-termism easier in Australia. We engage broadly and work collaboratively. We are multi-sector, non-profit, and non-partisan.

Our vision is an Australia with:

- **Broad Leadership:** A wide range of Australians engage in a mature and respectful debate about the society they want Australia to become and the key steps we need to take to get there given our current situation and the global trends that are likely to shape the future
- **Active Contribution:** Citizens and organisations at all levels of society and across all sectors and disciplines contribute to a flourishing shared future and take accountability for the future Australia they are creating by their action and inaction, rather than relying on or blaming others
- **21st Century Competence:** Australians and Australian institutions at all levels have the necessary relationships, knowledge, skills, and experience to enable inspired leadership, informed decisions, and cross-sector action in a complex and fast-changing world
- **Functioning Relationships:** There are functioning relationships: between government, citizens, experts, media, and business; between politicians and bureaucrats; and between levels of government

Systems thinking underpins our work. 'Systems thinking' is a way to see the world that looks beyond individual parts to the interactions and patterns that characterise the whole. In other words, systems provide the conceptual framework for understanding how things work. We believe that the Australian decision making system is a complex adaptive system. Such systems are dynamic, self-organising and constantly adapting to change. They exist within other interdependent systems. They are driven by interactions between system components and governed by feedback. Changes in one part of the system can cause changes in other parts of the system, often in nonlinear and unpredictable ways. People both shape the system and are influenced by the system (McKenzie, 2014).

Tackling challenges in such a context requires an emphasis on trying new approaches, and learning from the results. In complex systems, challenges do not lend themselves to permanent solutions, but instead tend to morph into new predicaments, even as the result of our interventions to deal with them. This makes the willingness to learn a key ingredient in improving system performance. Learning is not just for children. Implementation of any program or strategy should include deliberate plans for evaluation and reflection – with the goal of creating a system that prioritises ongoing learning, evaluation, reflection and adaptation.

The Australian Futures Project therefore designed its strategy around an iterative process that allows us to adjust to the things we and our partners learn at each stage of our work. We further refined this approach to include ongoing stakeholder engagement as well as two specific methods that take a 'systems' approach. The first is an 'incubator' approach. This involves '**incubator initiatives**' where the Australian Futures Project finds, tests, and builds improvements to Australia's decision-making system. The second approach, '**social labs**', is the subject of this paper.

## 1.2 WHAT IS A SOCIAL LAB?

We use the term 'social lab' to describe the process of bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to create new relationships, insights and understanding of a system, and to collaboratively frame, explore and co-create solutions to complex challenges in that system. Our **social labs** deploy a process that supports groups working on complex societal



issues to identify responses and build their own capacity to respond. We use a method of convening that allows for genuine participation from design through to execution.

Social labs are part of an emerging field of practice that has a range of names (like social innovation labs, Theory U, Presencing, system innovation labs) but which are essentially about creating the space for multiple stakeholders to convene around complex challenges and to rapidly prototype<sup>2</sup> and develop new methods and approaches. The collective process helps to widen perspectives, open possibilities, sharpen ideas, shape attitudes, build trust and alignment, and identify opportunities for intervention.

The concept and practice of social labs has been developing for almost two decades. According to Hassan (2014), social labs are platforms for addressing complex social challenges that have three core characteristics:

- **They are social.** Social labs start by bringing together diverse participants to work in a team that acts collectively. They are ideally drawn from different sectors of society, such as government, civil society, and the business community.
- **They are experimental.** Social labs are not one-off experiences. They're ongoing and sustained efforts. The team doing the work takes an iterative approach to the challenges it wants to address, prototyping interventions and managing a portfolio of promising solutions.
- **They are systemic.** The ideas and initiatives developed in social labs, realised as prototypes, aspire to be *systemic* in nature. This means trying to come up with solutions that go beyond dealing with a part of the whole, or symptoms, and address the root cause of why things are not working in the first place.

The lab concept is based on the belief that there is an abundance of energy, ideas, and untapped potential that we can leverage to address big challenges – if we can find ways to connect and learn faster and better. The social lab emphasises the role of dialogue, listening carefully with an open mind, cross-pollination of methods, approaches and perspectives and, finally, prototyping solutions. It is essentially about providing a safe space for new things to emerge (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2014). Social lab strategies include:

- **Mapping the system** to understand the larger context, system dynamics, inter-relationships
- **Questioning** the values and ways of doing things that underpin the existing system
- Identifying potential **leverage points** where we may best intervene
- Creating a **hypothesis** about how best to intervene, as well as hypotheses concerning the interactions of the solution with and within connected systems.
- Translating hypotheses into **prototypes** for new or improved solutions to social challenges (products, processes, policies, or services) and testing them
- Incorporating stakeholder **feedback**, immersion and observation to ensure solutions are really needed by end-users or affected populations and to refine both the hypothesis and prototype
- **Maintaining learning**, experimentation, and adaptation in initiatives that arise from the lab – and not just falling back in to traditional project management at the expense of more agile approaches.

The social lab process can prove challenging for some participants as it is not possible to predict beforehand what the outcome will be. Predicting exact outputs and an exact roadmap for this iterative journey is impossible. While this is the nature of innovation, for many it departs from a tradition of predetermined planning. Instead, it requires participants to refrain from trying to converge too quickly on an answer and instead allow time for exploration and divergence. As Hassan (2014) writes, they are not what we want solutions to look like, but are what they actually look like when effective. He says:

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<sup>2</sup> Rapid prototyping is an iterative learning approach informed by design thinking. It involves early stage (low resolution, low cost) testing of a hypothesis or solution (whether a product, process, policy, or service) and incorporating feedback from stakeholders and potential users. The results are used to rapidly refine the hypothesis and adapt the solution.



“These characteristics are not arbitrary. Nor are they convenient. Getting really diverse groups of people to simply step into a room together is hard, let alone trying to get them to act together. Taking an experimental approach requires not only discipline but also a degree of stability and commitment rare in a project-obsessed world. Addressing the root causes of challenges eschews easy and popular political wins in favor of longer time frames and greater uncertainty”.

Impacts can also be difficult to quantify but can include:

- Impact at the level of the social lab itself (including new connections between seemingly diverse projects and ideas)
- The cultivation and support of innovations and innovators
- An emerging new narrative about how the system works – or at least the emergence of deep questions that challenge the current narrative, even if a clear new narrative has not yet emerged

### 1.3 ORIGINS OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD) SOCIAL LAB

In early 2013, when we were developing our very first social lab, we chose to work on a theme that is inherently future focused, cross sectoral, multi-disciplinary and intergenerational: early childhood development (ECD). It was a topic for which there was appetite for action and windows of opportunity for change. It was also a topic for which it was possible to source philanthropic funding to support our work. We chose this topic not only because it was an appropriate topic, but because it is so important - Australia is experiencing a crisis in outcomes for children.

Early childhood is generally defined as the period from birth (or prenatal) to eight years old (UNESCO, 2013; WHO, 2014). ECD relates to how well a child is tracking in their development over this period. A great deal of time and work over many years has gone into developing the technical ECD framework in Australia, comprising a range of programs, visions and goals. Unfortunately, this effort is not being adequately translated into what is happening on the ground. **One in five children** enrolled in their first year of formal fulltime school are developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the five Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains:

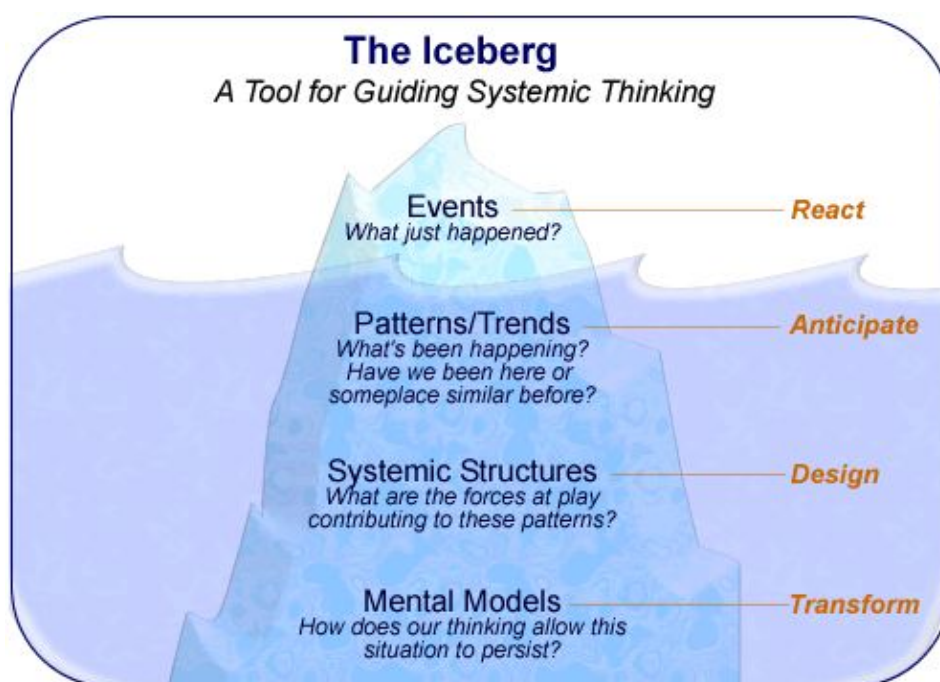
- Physical health and wellbeing
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive skills
- Communication skills and general knowledge

The figure increase to **one in three** (32%) for children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged Australian communities, and to 43.2% for indigenous children (Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009).

This trend continues despite clear evidence from Australia and overseas that the early years of a child's life have a profound impact on their future health, development, learning and wellbeing – as well as that of the entire community (Australian Government, 2013; Moore & McDonald, 2013). Put simply, ECD is not only important to the child today, but is also a predictor of future health of the individual and human capital of the nation (Australian Government, 2013).

Given the importance of ECD to our children and society as a whole, we believed this was not good enough. Our hypothesis was taking a 'systems approach' to enabling change would result in faster progress towards improved ECD outcomes for Australian children. This in turn would require an understanding of the deeper patterns, trends, systemic structures and mental models that drive everyday occurrences (events) in the system (illustrated in the iceberg model below). One way of achieving this would be to bring key participants together to collectively 'map' the system, identify leverage points for change and commit to ongoing action. In early 2013, we began exploring with ECD related organisations the potential for a social lab that took this approach.

FIGURE 1 ICEBERG MODEL OF SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS (GERBER, 2012)



Initially, the Australian Futures Project was in separate discussions with The Benevolent Society (Australia's oldest charity) and Goodstart Early Learning (Australia's largest provider of childcare and early learning) about two distinct initiatives. When they each heard about the other discussions, they suggested merging efforts, which we did. The early support of these two organisations was followed by an increased interest in involvement by other parties who heard about it either directly or indirectly. The Australian Futures Project met with the newly established Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy and with the ten20 Foundation. Separate and collective discussions followed from January 2013. Through meetings brokered by the Australian Futures Project, the Sponsor Group eventually grew to five organisations. This commitment took courage (not least because this was one of our first programs and because some of the organisations and individuals had not worked together before). The five organisations were:

- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
- The Benevolent Society
- Goodstart Early Learning
- Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy
- ten20 Foundation

This group was referred to as the 'Sponsor Group'. The first official meeting of the whole Sponsor Group was held in September 2013, nine months after initial discussions commenced. This shows that convening diverse actors in the system cannot be rushed. Over the following 7 months, the group met in-person four times (Sep 2013, Melbourne; Dec 2013, Sydney; Feb 2014, Sydney; April 2014, Melbourne). During this time, the Sponsor Group worked to determine its best contribution. Three subsequent Sponsor Group meetings were conducted via teleconference (June 2014; Dec 2014 and July 2015). These conversations were sometime difficult as everyone had different perceptions of the system, of the problem and the potential solution. Finding common language and common ground took patience and collective good will. Importantly, while some of the actual participants from the five organisations changed over time, once fully established, each organisation remained committed to the initiative throughout its life. A prospectus outlining an agreed position of Sponsor Group members was agreed to in June 2014.



The role of the Australian Futures Project was to co-design, facilitate, document, and organise the overall lab, building what could be thought of as its *container*. It also convened the Sponsor Group meetings and conducted analysis (with assistance from the Mitchell Institute). An important task for the Australian Futures Project throughout the lab was to maintain a balance between narrowing into to clarity and decision (important for keeping the Sponsor Group together, fundraising, and maintaining momentum) and being actively open to new perspectives, ideas, participants, and possibility (important for systemic change).

As will be described below, the lab expanded over time to include participants from all around Australia. We went through various phases which were essentially iterations of the overall process. While they were more messy and interconnected than this simple description would imply, it is possible to categorise the initiative in terms of three distinct stages:

- Design (Jan 2013 to Jun 2014)
- Diagnose (Jul to Dec 2014)
- Convene (Jan to Jul 2015)

The process and results of each of these stages are described in Sections 2 to 5.

## 1.4 SUPPORT FOR THE INITIATIVE

Before we move in to the details of each Stage, it is important to acknowledge the financial support of the following organisations that made System Shift initiative possible. This isn't easy work to fund – the purpose of a social lab can be difficult to communicate, its impact hard to measure, and outcomes hard to predict. Without funding, the work of the Australian Futures Project to convene the initiative could not have happened. We are grateful to everyone who supported us throughout the two-and-a-half year journey. We started each Stage of the initiative with no idea of where the money would come from, or if fundraising would be successful, but each time found organisations that were willing to support us. Over the life of the project, a total of \$201,000 was contributed. In addition, Sponsor Group participants covered their own costs and time to attend meetings, provide advice to the project team, and review work produced during the initiative.

As indicated above, Stage One ran for eighteen months. During this time, we relied upon \$65,000 support from:

- La Trobe University (\$50,000)
- Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (\$15,000)

In Stage Two, an intensive six month research phase, our work was supported by a total of \$79,000 in funding from:

- La Trobe University (\$50,000)
- The Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy (\$14,000)
- Goodstart Early Learning (\$10,000)
- ten20 Foundation (\$5,000)

In Stage Three, a total of \$57,000 in funding made the design and facilitation of the June 2015 retreat possible, including the enrolment of and ongoing liaison with participants. In this Stage, the following organisations supported the work of the Australian Futures Project:

- Reefshark Foundation (\$20,000)
- Goodstart Early Learning (\$20,000)
- Blackwood Foundation (\$10,000)
- The Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy (\$5,000)
- The Benevolent Society (\$2,000)



In addition, Sponsor Group organisations and several philanthropic foundations covered the cost of attendance for their own individual retreat participants. Funders that supported the attendance of local community representatives included: Opportunity Child and the ten20 Foundation (5 participants), CAGES Foundation (4 participants), The Benevolent Society (2 participants), Goodstart Early Learning (1 participant), Good Beginnings (1 participant), and Family by Family (1 participant).

## 2 STAGE ONE: DESIGN (JAN 2013 TO JUN 2014)

### 2.1 OVERVIEW

Stage One focussed on enrolling the Sponsor Group partner organisations in the (yet to be named) initiative and co-designing a process that would deliver both new leadership as well as new capabilities in systems thinking and action. From start to finish, this stage took eighteen months, as alignment was built between partners.

From the beginning, we challenged the Sponsor Group to answer a series of questions focussed both on the "what" (i.e., what does the desired future look like?) and the "how" (i.e., how the "system" makes decisions and takes action rather than the day-to-day "operational" how) of the ECD system. For example:

- What does progress look like?
- What needs to happen to enable progress?
- What is the nature of the challenge / opportunity?
- What are the barriers and levers to achieving progress?
- How will the sector act differently – together and individually?

### 2.2 OUTCOMES FROM STAGE ONE

Stage One outcomes included:

1. Developing a clearer understanding and articulation by the Sponsor Group of the scope of the initiative: this included agreeing to the name and purpose - **SYSTEM SHIFT: Building leadership and capability to work differently together to improve outcomes for Australian children**. It also included the signing of a prospectus by the Sponsor Group that featured:
  - A collective commitment and call to action: "As leaders in Australia's early childhood development system, we have committed our organisations to working differently together to improve outcomes for Australian children. We invite others to join us. We know that this is tough, requires leadership and new capabilities, and will take time. We know it requires action at the individual, organisation, and system levels. To this end, beginning in 2013, we embarked on an initiative that takes a systems approach to building leadership and capability to work differently together to improve outcomes for Australian children".
  - A shared goal: to reduce the proportion of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on the Australian Early Development Index at age 5 from 22% (2012) to 15% by 2020 (consistent with the Nest National Plan for Child and Youth Wellbeing Action Agenda).
  - Eight 'givens' (a summary of which is provided below) on which they could all agree



2. Designing for impact in the context of complex adaptive systems: the Sponsor Group agreed on the detail for Stage Two (diagnosis) and sketched a plan for Stage Three (convene). Design principles that emerged early on where:
  - Our niche with this initiative is to take a systems approach to building leadership and capability to work differently together to improve outcomes for Australian children.
  - We are not identifying new agendas, targets, strategies, action plans, or initiatives.
  - We are focussed on building leadership and capability so that the ECD system as a whole delivers better outcomes.
  - We bring a diverse range of stakeholders together from across the system in order to draw on their knowledge, experience and capacity to find and build solutions that otherwise wouldn't be identified.
  - Our approach is an open but guided process of engaging and convening.
3. Acting for impact in the context of complex adaptive systems: The Sponsor Group was established and through the prospectus committed to supporting ongoing action beyond Stage One. There were also new and enhanced links made between Sponsor Group members that are having an impact beyond this initiative (in terms of, e.g., new collaborations)

## 2.3 THE EIGHT “GIVENS”

### 2.3.1 EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT HAS LIFELONG OUTCOMES

There is clear evidence from Australia and overseas that the early years of a child's life have a profound impact on their future health, development, learning and wellbeing. Research shows investing in resources to support children in their early years of life brings long-term benefits to them and the whole community (Australian Government, 2013). These benefits extend through out a lifetime, well beyond early childhood (Moore and McDonald, 2013). Conversely, developmental concerns that are evident at school entry tend to continue and exacerbate over the primary school years, particularly for poorer children (Goldfeld *et al.*, 2013). They can also have lifelong negative effects in terms of future employment and income, mental and physical health, and social and criminal behaviour (Moore and McDonald, 2013).

### 2.3.2 AUSTRALIA IS LAGGING BEHIND OTHER COUNTRIES IN DELIVERING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

While improvements have been made and the majority of children are doing well, Australia is not performing as well as it could. Of particular concern are outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- For 14 of 46 relevant OECD indicators, Australia is ranked in the bottom third. Australia has the fourth highest rate of children living in jobless families in the OECD [15%], with one in six children living below the poverty line. Australia ranks 30th out of 34 OECD member countries for the percentage (%) of children attending preschool or preschool program before starting school (ARACY, 2013; Moore & McDonald, 2013).
- One in five Australian children is vulnerable in one or more Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) developmental domains when they start school. One in seven Australian children is affected by a behavioural or emotional problem (Moore & McDonald, 2013);
- Nearly half of indigenous children are vulnerable in one or more developmental domains when they start school. Indigenous rates of psychological distress and suicide are close to three times the national average (Moore & McDonald, 2013);



- The rate of children on care and protection orders has almost doubled over the past decade (AIHW, 2012). Child abuse substantiations have also increased over last five years. The sharpest rise has been in emotional abuse and neglect.

### 2.3.3 THERE ARE MANY PAST, PRESENT, AND PLANNED INITIATIVES AIMED AT IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN

Today, the number of policies, programs, strategies and investments into ECD is at its highest point ever in Australia's history. This is a testament to the many organisations and individuals who have dedicated themselves to the health and wellbeing of Australian children. It is also the result of 15 years of intensive reforms. Much of these reforms have focused on seeking to ensure that children start school healthy and ready to learn. In addition, there has been a strong focus on improving the quality of services and this has involved both pedagogical (education) and regulatory sectoral reform. However, as described above, the outcomes for children from these policies and investments have been mixed. Ongoing challenges remain.

### 2.3.4 WE ALREADY KNOW WHAT WE NEED TO DO AT A TECHNICAL LEVEL TO DELIVER BETTER OUTCOMES FOR AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN

The challenge is acting on what we know. Comprehensive action is beyond the capacity of any single organisation. There is no right approach and disagreements exist about the best way to proceed. Meanwhile, solutions will need to evolve as implementation reveals new insights into the problem.

### 2.3.5 FUNDING IS ONLY ONE DETERMINANT OF SUCCESS IN THE ECD SYSTEM

We cannot rely on additional funding to do the things we know we need to do at a technical level, even if additional funding is desirable (see, e.g., Commission of Audit, 2014). Firstly, it is unlikely that significant new funding from government will be dedicated to ECD over the next ten years. Secondly, even if more funding were available, funding is only one determinant of success in the ECD system. It is therefore important to work on the other determinants of success whether or not additional funding is available. Finally, even with the same amount of money, it is possible to do things differently, raising the question of how to better marshal existing resources more effectively.

### 2.3.6 TO DELIVER BETTER OUTCOMES FOR AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN WITH CURRENT LEVELS OF FUNDING, IT IS MORE EFFECTIVE TO IDENTIFY AND MAKE IMPROVEMENTS TO THE ECD SYSTEM THAN TO TREAT SYMPTOMS

Improving systems requires an understanding of systems. We are not interested in simply treating the symptoms. We are focussed on taking the time and space to understand and shift the underlying mental models, systemic structures, and patterns / trends (including our own) that drive the results we achieve collectively in ECD. We accept that progress might be slow at first. We are convinced that unless we act patiently at this deeper level, we will remain stuck in the hamster wheel achieving what we are achieving today with no better outcome for Australian children.



### 2.3.7 TO IDENTIFY AND MAKE IMPROVEMENTS TO THE ECD SYSTEM, WE IN THE ECD SYSTEM NEED TO WORK DIFFERENTLY TOGETHER

If individuals and organisations in the ECD system (including we in the Sponsor Group) continue behaving the way they have been behaving, it is unlikely potential improvements to the ECD system at the deep levels of mental models and systemic structure will be uncovered. We will be stuck reacting to events. We won't change our mental models, and we won't change the systemic structure in which we operate. Our patterns / trends will continue as they are today. The resulting events will not change. Outcomes for children in Australia will not improve. We need to work differently together.

### 2.3.8 TO WORK DIFFERENTLY TOGETHER, WE MUST BUILD LEADERSHIP AND CAPABILITY AT THE INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANISATION LEVELS, WHICH WILL TAKE TIME AND PATIENCE

System transformation can only happen if individuals and organisations in the system transform. This is not easy. It will take time. It takes leadership and new capabilities, including in:

- **Thinking** in systems (including systems literacy; observing mental models, systemic structures, and patterns / trends; and “unlearning” existing behaviours)
- **Designing** for impact in the context of complex adaptive systems (including innovation, prototyping, comfort with failure, evaluation, and adaptation)
- **Acting** for impact in the context of complex adaptive systems (including collaboration and systems leadership)

The Sponsor Group agreed that this is why we collectively embarked on the System Shift initiative to build leadership and capability at the individual and organisation levels.

## 3 STAGE TWO: DIAGNOSE (JUL TO DEC 2014)

### 3.1 OVERVIEW

Having reached agreement on an overall direction and design in Stage One, the initiative moved on to Stage Two in July 2014. This was a six month stage of diagnosis. The Sponsor Group had decided that in order to better understand the system, it was important to engage with high-level decision makers on their perspectives of the system. It was also important to synthesise the vast amount of existing knowledge already available. Both these pieces of research would result in a deeper understanding of the ECD system and the drivers of outcomes (good and bad) for Australian children at a national level. This was an important step before stakeholders were to be convened. To this end, the Australian Futures Project conducted two research projects, which underpin the outcomes from Stage Two.

### 3.2 OUTCOMES FROM STAGE TWO

The first piece of research involved a literature review of existing reports and information. The Australian Futures Project, with the Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy, prepared a discussion paper reviewing what is known about ECD in Australia, including outcomes for children and areas of concern. The paper summarised a range of existing goals and actions for the ECD agenda in Australia and examines some of the processes, structures, relationships and actors that help to shape dynamics of the system. The paper, *Australia's Early Childhood Development system: what we know*.



Australian Futures Project, is available at: <http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP-Early-Childhood-Development-What-We-Know-141212.pdf>

The second involved in-depth qualitative interviews with 35 decision makers including service providers, business leaders, Ministers, senior bureaucrats, leading academics and NGO representatives. The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the system by exploring the different perspectives of a diverse group of high-level actors from across the system. In order to capture diversity of thinking, questions were open-ended. Interviews were conducted either in person or via phone and were fully transcribed. The final report uses extensive quoting from the interviews to reflect different perspectives. The report, *Early Childhood Development: Perspectives of the System. Interviews with 35 Australian decision-makers*, is available at: <http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP-Early-Childhood-Development-System-Perspectives-141212.pdf>

These interviews with Australian decision makers about how the ECD system works reveals a range of key drivers:

- Inconsistencies between ECD operators across private, not-for-profit, and State, Territory and Local government-managed organisations
- Fragmentation between the types of ECD services offered, to whom they are available and how they can be accessed by children and families
- 'Territorialism' amongst organisations competing for a limited pool of funds from Federal, State, Territory, and Local governments
- Lack of information sharing, which prevents successful local initiatives being adopted more broadly
- Society at large not valuing ECD highly enough

Ultimately, four key challenges emerged:

1. How can we increase the value those society-at-large places on families and early childhood development?
2. How can we create more cohesive / integrated and child-centred ECD services and systems?
3. How can we build the capacity of parents, families and communities to provide a positive and nurturing environment for their children?
4. What can be done differently to reach hard-to-reach and vulnerable families?

Each of these themes is described in further detail below.

### 3.3 THE FOUR THEMES

#### 3.3.1 HOW CAN WE INCREASE THE VALUE THAT SOCIETY-AT-LARGE PLACES ON FAMILIES AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

There was a desire to see society **valuing the role of families and the importance of early childhood development for its own sake** (not just for economic reasons). This was driven by a wish to see ECD become the 'norm'. One rationale is that such values would generate a willingness on behalf of tax payers to support the actions that are needed in the 'in-home' and 'out-of-home' services contexts. In particular, tax payer support would be crucial to ensuring the greater affordability and accessibility of out-of-home services. There was also an assumption (or hope) that greater tax payer (and voter) support would potentially also facilitate a willingness on behalf of governments to support alternative funding arrangements of the sector that promote greater cohesion (and less adverse competition), as well as greater resources to pay for qualified and trained staff. In order to better communicate to wider society the values of ECD, the common view was that there needs to be a greater shared narrative and common language across the ECD system.

Almost half of all interviewees raised points around the way the ECD message has been conveyed. This related to comments on the need for a clearer narrative, a national conversation and the current failure to effectively communicate



the value of ECD. It also included comments on the potentially positive role of **creating a shared narrative and common language**. Interviewees referenced previous national campaigns related to smoking, sunscreen, immunisation and drink driving:

i11: In my head it's similar to the no smoking campaigns, the Slip, Slop, Slap campaigns, the measles campaigns where there's a consistent message coming from a whole range of high profile people but the message is very simple and it is supported by future advertisements et cetera. You rarely get change in a society without it and it's almost at that level that I think it needs to happen so that agencies, not for profits and others start to re-focus in a common way.

i12: At the moment all the peak body and research groups and all of that are saying something similar but it's very easy for it to get missed because it's not simple. ... I think by pulling people together and having that common message ... I think it's about a partnership, so it's not just up to Government.

i17: I suppose it's a bit like you have a national campaign for safer roads or national campaign for smoking, anti-smoking, things like which states and territories will support and do it in their own way as well. It takes 20 to 30 years to make some sort of change in that area but it's having that national message it's – that's the lack of the system.

### 3.3.2 HOW CAN WE CREATE MORE COHESIVE / INTEGRATED AND CHILD-CENTRED ECD SERVICES AND SYSTEMS?

One of the most significant challenges for service provision appeared to be the degree of fragmentation amongst different types of services and organisations in the system. The common view was that there needs to be much more cohesion and integration in the provision of services, with less territorialism between different organisations and disciplines and much better ways of working together. While funding was recognised as a crucial component of being able to implement ECD services, it was also perceived to be one of the drivers of 'territorialism' amongst organisations. These views came from a mix of interviewees, both in the non-for-profit sector as well as in business and government.

i1: You just have to play games. The trouble is, when you play the games, you get lost in your own game and nothing much changes... Government structures are funding so we are in competition, very often... The minute they talk about competitive tendering, which is a commercial idea, they're actually screwing our sector... Agencies were told that if they talk to each other, they would be disqualified from the tender. Which meant that agencies who had joint work or integrated work across different programs contributing to the one benefit suddenly were competitors... We all play the game because we want to survive. We want our agencies to survive.

On **finding ways of working better together**, there was a common view that short-term funding cycles and the need to constantly compete for funds promoted competition at the expense of collaborative endeavours. For example:

We would like to see a system in which organisations and individuals within them are supported and are trained and their capability has grown and their skill set is expanded to encompass this space of collaboration so that they actually have the basic tools on how to go about it, so to break that chain of competitive bid funding. Then to also really have an agreed focus that we all work together on the same shared social outcomes for kids zero to eight.

It was thought that greater cohesion would potentially help in **addressing the 'gap' at 2-3 years**, when many children miss out on required ECD services, as well as what needs to be a more seamless transition to school. Solutions proposed included free access to external ECD services for all children, regardless of the occupation or 'worthiness' of their parents.

It was also suggested that overcoming difficulties in collaboration required both greater capacity as well as organisational mandate.



i8: Usually partnerships or cross collaboration happens when one person from one organisation initiates it. One has got an idea they go to another person, they get a couple of people organised, there's a great idea. But then what they have to do is they have to sell it back within the organisation... Unless you get that engagement, commitment and ownership right through an organisation and right through all the partners you're not going to actually get too far... We often think of the partnership as just a couple of people sitting at the table but it's much bigger and broader than that. Unless you have all the organisations, the same strength and capability and knowledge and skills around partnering, if you've got one weak blade well then the helicopter doesn't take off, it just starts spinning around and around and doesn't get anywhere

Associated with the issue of capacity was the issuing of resourcing different ways of working together:

i21: The work that it takes to make this new way of working work is never resourced... When you get a funding contract to deliver something and you will be lucky if you've even got anything that says, "Put one cent towards administration," let alone what it actually takes to form a productive collaboration to make things actually work in a different way. Where I've been involved in things that have really worked in terms of quite true collaborations, they've taken hours and hours and hours of un-resourced time off people who are just committed to doing that... You could spend a year just working to get everybody clearly on the same page, how you're actually going to make this work, get all the, "This is mine, that's not yours," that sort of stuff on the table. All of that before you ever walk out and see a family under those new circumstances.

### 3.3.3 HOW CAN WE BUILD THE CAPACITY OF PARENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO PROVIDE A POSITIVE AND NURTURING ENVIRONMENT FOR THEIR CHILDREN?

In the home, the biggest issue identified was **the capacity of parents, families and communities to provide a positive and nurturing environment for their children**. As part of this was the sense that most parents really wanted to do the best they could for their children, but didn't always know how. There was a sense that parenting had to some degree been overlooked by government and 'professionals' in the sector:

i4: A lot of the policy focus, at the moment in Australia, is around early childhood education settings, and how do we deal with the quality of that? But that is still a smaller fraction of the time compared to the time that children spend at home with their parents. So I think we've got to have our services geared not just to providing high quality services for the children when they're not with their parents, but also supporting parents to provide the best environments they can.

This was accompanied by discussion of how to best intervene to help parents without alienating them. The suggestion was that ECD service providers need to work with parents in a non-threatening environment to develop the skills required for appropriate parenting:

i19: Families feel very judged. If they're marginalised families they feel so judged and actually for them, there appears to be a barbed wire fence around the building and it takes quite a lot of wire cutting to knock that down.

On **building the capacity of parents**, interviews spoke about recognising the crucial role of parents and creating programs that help engage parents rather than alienating them. For example:

I think we've got to have our services geared not just to providing high quality services for the children when they're not with their parents, but also supporting parents to provide the best environments they can.

i34: When you frame it in terms of the child's development, most parents have aspirations for their kids, they want their kids to be able to thrive, they may not know how to get there or they may not be in a position to get there, so helping with knowledge and assistance and all that kind of thing is, as you say, starting from assumptions of most parents want this, why would this parent be different, how do we get there? That then helps remove the judgement and the parent is part of the same team.



Delivering this was also thought to require **engendering trust and engagement at the community level**. One suggestion for achieving this was to further devolve ECD responsibilities to communities and to empower them to manage their own service delivery. Creating capacity at the community level across the system would overcome the need to scale up or down approaches, something which has been a struggle for many public and private sector service providers. Interviewees commented on the difficult but essential task of building trust when working with communities. It was seen as a crucial ingredient in successfully engaging families and building participation.

i11: To build the trust you've got to have strong relationships but for that to happen you've got to have belief that you can make the difference. That's a very difficult thing for a policy person to line up because you're relying very much on the workforce understanding the direction and that when they go into these communities commit to it day in and day out to make that difference.

In terms of the **blindspots** identified, they largely related to the home environment (economic inequality; mental health; Foetal Alcohol Syndrome; linking in with services provided for parents; child neglect). Overcoming these blindspots would be helped both by building the capacity of parents and families, as well as stronger more cohesive out of home services that do not let child fall between the cracks in the system. This is in turn is of course driven by society-at-large accepting and valuing the importance of both ECD and families.

### 3.3.4 WHAT CAN BE DONE DIFFERENTLY TO REACH HARD-TO-REACH AND VULNERABLE FAMILIES?

In the interviews, a common theme was the failure of the system to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families. This was in the context of social welfare and child protection as well as early intervention.

i15: All of these service systems are making decisions invariably based on whether the mother deserves or doesn't deserve their support, and not whether the children deserve their support. That, I think, is one of the biggest potential changes we could make in the way the service system works across the board, whether we're talking community service, health services or education services. It's got to be put the children first and decide what they need and support the family accordingly, and let's get away from whether the mum deserves it or not because punishing Mum is actually putting children's lives at risk.

i20: What we've found through feedback from parents is just that the system isn't working for them. You go in to access something for a child and it's not until one of them is reported for child abuse that all of a sudden they get the support they need.

i22: Early intervention gets lip service. Everyone knows it's good to intervene early but everywhere is headed around basically stopping the flow into the out of home care system.

i34: Child protection involvement is triggered once there is a suspicion that harm has already occurred or it's pretty likely to occur, so it's coming far too late, that kind of support and engagement for children and families.

i25: Most jurisdictions have tried to develop mechanisms to bring more of a whole-of-Government focus to vulnerable kids often off the back of child protection type crises. This is meant to be broader than child protection but not broad enough to incorporate every vulnerable child at every point in time. ... I think one of the big tensions in Government is should you build universal platforms that are for everyone and hope that vulnerable kids get the same access and the same benefits from them or do you have to target more of your efforts to assist vulnerable kids and build connections between the system of services for vulnerable kids and the universal platform?

Overall, Stage Two resulted in a much deeper understanding of the drivers of outcomes for Australian children. It took a systems approach, exploring a range of system components, including:

- Actors (formal and informal)



- Processes (e.g. agenda-setting, decision-making, policies, implementation)
- Relationships (e.g. reflected in networks, values, trust, engagement, power, leadership)
- Structures (e.g. laws, regulations, institutional rules, social norms and mores)
- Resources (e.g. skills, data, knowledge, money, technology, time)

The fact that we each experience and understand these components of the system in different ways is what makes collaboration and dialogue so important when working in a complex system.

## 4 STAGE THREE: CONVENE (JAN TO JUL 2015)

### 4.1 OVERVIEW

Stage Three was another six-month process that ran from January to July 2015. The focus for this Stage was decided in a Sponsor Group meeting in December 2014 that reviewed the findings of the diagnosis stage. It was decided that Stage Three should focus on (i) what works at a local level, and (ii) what policy settings, enabling conditions, and support communities need from Government to transform practice on the ground. This was to be in the context of the four challenges identified in the diagnosis stage (described above).

The reasons for a local-level focus were:

- Meaningful action can occur at a local level because this is where implementation happens
- Lessons from 'satellites of success' can be applied to other local-level initiatives
- People involved in local-level initiatives can inform policy-makers about the policy settings, enabling conditions and support that community initiatives need from Government to transform practice on the ground

Given the local-level focus, it was agreed that Stage Three should be run in collaboration with other interested initiatives and organisations that are linking with local communities that are **collaborative and innovative**. The reasons for linking with other initiatives and organisations were:

- To foster meaningful action beyond the retreat, recognising that this requires sustained engagement and resourcing, and other initiatives and organisations can provide this beyond the limited life of the System Shift initiative
- To enable a mix of different collaborative approaches and types of communities to be involved, increasing the peer-to-peer learning opportunities for communities involved
- Community participants have already been identified and enrolled by other initiatives and organisations
- Collaboration is more powerful than to duplication, especially given the overlap in partners and networks of many in the ECD system
- The System Shift initiative can phase out without losing continuity for partners and participants: the lessons and knowledge gained will be transferred and built on in Opportunity Child (including through its Learning Partners, Toolkit, and Policy streams) and other partner initiatives and organisations

The overall objectives of Stage Three were to enable participants to:

- Gain a deeper understanding of the range of views, perspectives and experiences of those currently involved at the local level of the ECD system
- Derive an understanding of principles for implementation arising from 'satellites of success'
- Experiment with and learn new ways of working, addressing complex issues, and collaborating with others



- Walk away with a stronger sense of purpose, a motivation to act and a clear sense of the obstacles to change—and the opportunities—at a systemic, organisational and individual level

Stage 3 culminated in a retreat held over three days from **2-4 June 2015**. During the retreat, participants were guided through a process of: mapping the system; stepping into other parts of the system; thematic deep dives; reflection on cross-cutting issues; and rapid prototyping. In the prototyping session, participants prototyped a portfolio of initiatives, some of which failed and some of which have continued to evolve and thrive.

## 4.2 ENGAGING WITH PARTICIPANTS

A policy brief, *Early Childhood Development in Australia: Challenging the system*, was prepared for participants that summarised the findings from Stage Two. It is available at: [http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP\\_PB2\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Development\\_150521.pdf](http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP_PB2_Early_Childhood_Development_150521.pdf)

Participants were also invited to take part in a 20-minute telephone interview prior to the retreat (11 out of 19 took part) that explored:

- Questions they wanted to explore with other participants
- Questions they would like to ask policy makers
- Outcomes they would like to see from the retreat, personally, organisationally and for the wider ECD system

Questions that arose during these interviews, and also during the retreat, have been collated and are available in Annex I. They show some of the ongoing work required and the sort of issues that participants were concerned about.

### 4.2.1 COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

Finally, participants from innovative local level initiatives were asked to complete a questionnaire about their program. It included 12 questions focused on the nature, drivers and outcomes of their collaborative project. This information was intended as a resource and discussion starter for participants to learn about each other's work. Responses were compiled and shared with all retreat participants (but not for public distribution). Nine of 13 participants invited to complete the questionnaire did so.

The results included here relate to a question that provided a checklist of various factors (on structure and governance; resources and capacities; social capital; accountability and transparency) that literature (McKenzie, 2013) shows may be important in collaborative processes. Respondents were asked to rank the 'most important' factors according to their experience in implementation.

Those that rated most highly were:

- Leadership (by the convener, practitioner, funder or other) (8)
- Capacity to build relationships (8)
- Transparency of process (6)
- Structures for reaching agreement on collaborative activities and goals (5)
- Technical, logistical and/or administrative support (5)
- Organisational management capabilities (5)
- Mutual benefit (5)
- Mutual trust (5)

The least highly rated were:

- Conflict resolution mechanisms (1)
- Incentives to collaborate (1)
- Performance consequences (1)



This is not to say that these weren't important, but that they weren't rated as the "most important" factors. Table 1 below shows the full list of responses to this question. There are likely to be many other factors not listed.

**TABLE 1 QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES ON THE ASPECTS HAVE BEEN MOST IMPORTANT IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS**

<b>Structure and Governance</b>	<b>Score</b>
Leadership (by the convener, practitioner, funder or other)	8
Structures for reaching agreement on collaborative activities and goals	5
Governance of behaviour and relationships	3
Administrative coordination	3
Conflict resolution mechanisms	1
Incentives to collaborate	1
<b>Resources and Capacities</b>	
Capacity to build relationships	8
Technical, logistical and/or administrative support	5
Organisational management capabilities	5
Adequate funding	4
Adequate staff time	3
Pragmatic trust-building processes	3
Knowledge and competencies sharing	2
<b>Social Capital</b>	
Mutual benefit	5
Mutual trust	5
Community appetite for change	4
Shared theory of change	3
Mutual understanding	2
Shared knowledge	2
<b>Accountability and Transparency</b>	
Transparency of process	6
Results based accountability	4
Partner accountability	2
Performance consequences	1



## 4.3 THE JUNE 2015 RETREAT

The Australian Futures Project specifically designed the retreat process to enable participants to learn from their peers, identify transformative actions, and create an ongoing network of support anchored in existing structures. Hosting a retreat for three days allowed participants the opportunity to step back from existing plans, answers, preconceptions and biases in a safe and creative space. By participants staying in residence onsite, they had unstructured time, particularly over meals, to continue conversations informally.

Days One and Two were focused on collaboration, group work and peer-to-peer learning amongst 19 participants from local initiatives, service providers, researchers and funders. This mix of participants was intentional to ensure that a variety of system perspectives were included. Participants were guided through a series of sessions that included:

- Systems Thinking
- Common language
- Mapping the system
- Stepping into other parts of the system
- Thematic Deep Dives (on four themes)
- Reflection on cross-cutting issues and questions
- Rapid Prototyping: group work on a nominated challenge

Day Three was designed to be an interface with representatives from State and Territory governments. There were a total of 32 participants that took part in Day Three, including eight senior policy makers and additional representatives from philanthropy and service providers. A full list of participants is available in Annex II. The day culminated in a participant presentation on the preceding two days and an open discussion with policy makers in a plenary session.

To illustrate the depth of discussion, we have included notes from the sessions on i) Mapping the System and ii) Thematic Deep Dives.



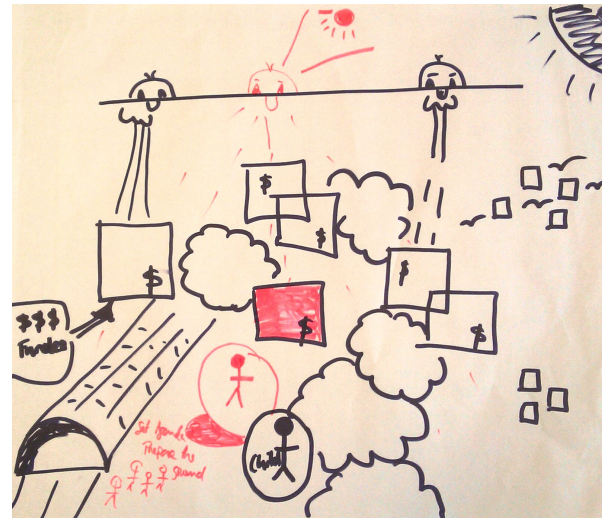
### 4.3.1 MAPPING THE SYSTEM

From the 'Mapping the system' session, we've included the images that the four groups each drew, with some of the participants' comments about what each image means.



***"The system is chaotic. We work around it".***

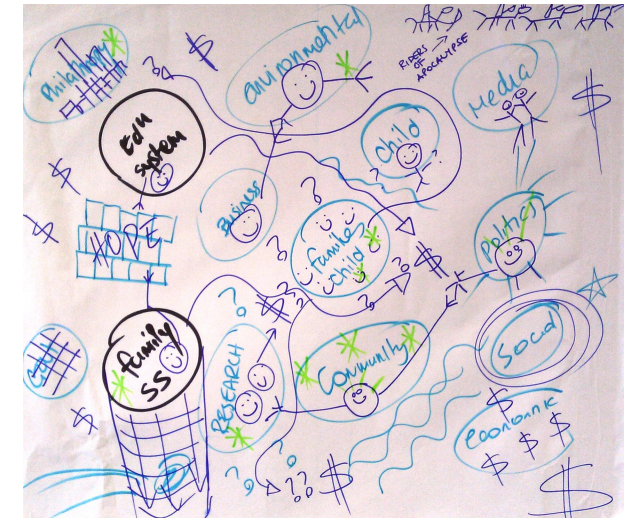
- The spaghetti soup of frontline services
- A sluggish snail and the straightjacket of regulation
- Innovative parts of the system
- Brick walls
- The different language that front line uses versus corporates, philanthropists



***"We are all boxed in our own areas".***

***"The reality is the child is at the bottom of a complex and messy system".***

- Some agencies and actors are working in an open and flexible way
- The box of dollars is inflexible. But donors like boxes.
- The power over the boxes is uneven.
- It is not necessarily a question of not enough money.
- Being squeezed and managed through a tunnel.



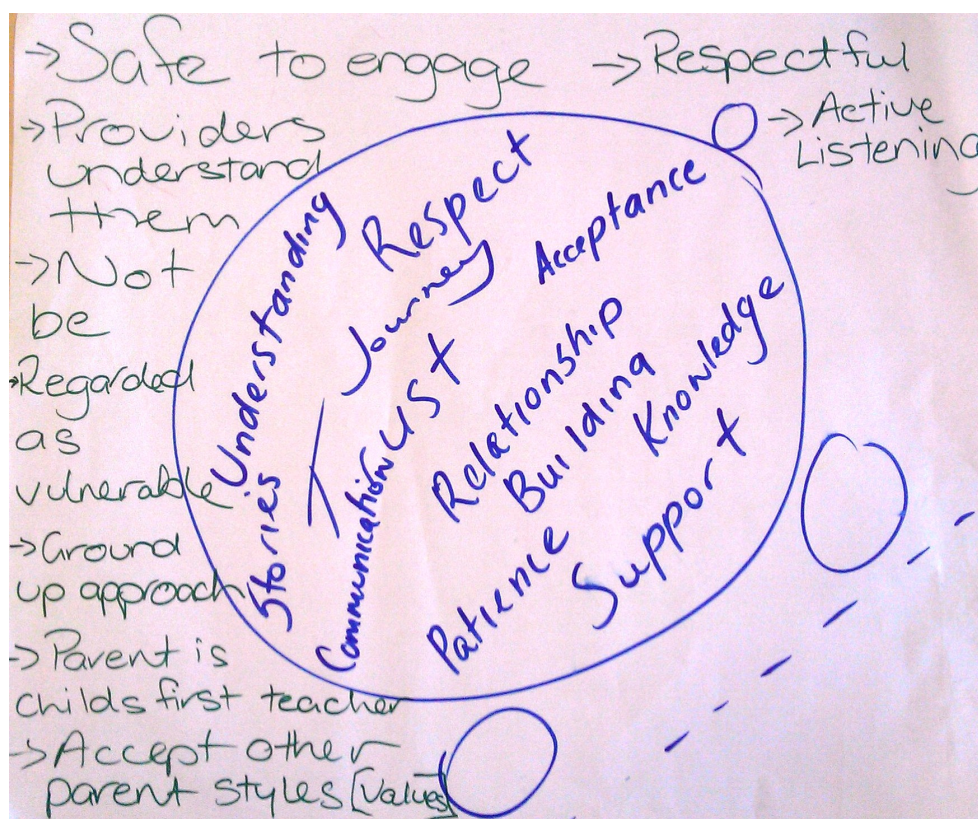
***"We spend a lot of time looking for the next dollar".***

***"It gets confusing for families and children to navigate the system".***

- "Apocalyptic cynicism" and "deep hope"
- Funding can affect the way agencies operate.
- Lots of walls and rivers and moats that get in the way
- Graffiti on the wall – this is hope.
- In many places there are real gems of human beings - despite what is happening in the system.



Compared to the prior three, the fourth group had a different take on the mapping the system exercise. They drew a 'bus' based on the group's conversation around how to engage with the system. The bus reflected the understanding that for this group, the system was all about the relationship with the local community. For them, the bus represented the need for: understanding, respect, journey, acceptance, trust, relationship building, support, patience, stories, knowledge, communication. It was about "the link between the service you are offering and the people that want the service". They felt that, "it is our job to do that – or otherwise we've missed the bus".



#### 4.3.2 THEMATIC DEEP DIVES ON THE FOUR THEMES

From the 'Thematic Deep Dives' sessions, we've included participants' responses to the questions:

- What are we doing well?
- What are the challenges?
- Questions
- What change is required?
- Sacred cows
- Possible actions

Firstly, it should be noted that participants suggested revised language for each of the four themes - to reflect an approach that was more bottom-up and more about working with families, rather than implying a top-down (or outside in) approach where families and the wider system needed to be fixed (by someone else). We have adopted this revised wording in the discussion of the 4 themes below (see Table 2).



TABLE 2 REVISED WORDING FOR THE FOUR THEMES (SUGGESTED BY PARTICIPANTS)

Theme	Original wording	Revised wording
1	How can we increase the value that society-at-large places on families and early childhood development?	How can we increase the value society places on families and the development of their children before they go to school?
2	How can we create more cohesive / integrated and child-centred ECD services and systems?	How can we create ECD services and systems that work together for improved outcomes?
3	How can we build the capacity of parents, families and communities to provide a positive and nurturing environment for their children?	How can we support families and communities to provide positive, safe and nurturing environments for their children?
4	What can be done differently to reach hard-to-reach and vulnerable families?	What could we do to engage families who are not reaching out to us?

**Theme 1: How can we increase the value society places on families and the development of their children before they go to school?**

**What are we doing well?**

- There is a lot of ground work that has been done and can be built upon.
- There are pockets of community where family and children are really valued. It isn't just across all system.
- Australia has a great track record of mounting attitudinal/behavioural change campaigns (e.g. quit smoking, road safety, HIV, water saving).
- The AECD is a hugely important data tool that can provide knowledge as a starting point of public debate.
- The evidence is on our side about how important ECD is - it hasn't always existed.
- There is a growing sense of community within the sector
- Different grass roots groups are popping up in unexpected places and organising themselves around the importance of family and children in society. They are building momentum around issues for children and families
- We already have a really well researched and well developed campaign for engaging children in the ECD story (COAG funded research into a social marketing campaign that never saw the light of day but could be revisited)

**What are the challenges?**

- The lack of political commitment on an ongoing basis has been disruptive.
- The need to 'keep up with the Jones' places a lot of pressure on families instead of focusing on simple things that can hold them together.
- Policy and decision making doesn't include children.
- Confusion around role of government at all levels in this space
- It is a crowded market with issues and ideas around the future of the country.
- It focuses on 'them over there' and not about us.
- Different parts of the sector not being on the same page
- Competing messages in community and for community



- Children get lost in the debate on economic participation - the idea of the child and what is important for children gets lost in those different messages, especially around workforce participation
- The dominant paradigm is that you have children and from 6 months old you have 1.5 parents working. Children go to care. It is seen as baby sitting and that it only schools whose job is to educate the kids.
- The environment creates competition. Funding territorialism means working in isolation, fragmentation
- Lack of trust which is connected to issues of quality.
- We put the organisations survival ahead of the community outcome. In the chaos the thing that makes sense is sustaining you organisation. Because can't be sure anything else will have impact in the uncertainty. Most of us would be more willing to give up that resource or power if they could be confident it would achieve something.

#### Questions

- How does economic policy affect how families will operate in society - with the focus on going back to work with the understanding that someone will look after your kids?
- What effect does children going in to education very early have on the way that families get together?

#### What change is required?

- The community needs to value children and we should look after them and raise them well so they have opportunities that we didn't have.
- The system needs to be more integrated
- People should be included. Society is about people not just government and policy. People can be part of amazing change in spite of policies that are in opposition
- We don't always have to wait for consensus at a high level. The home learning environment can be seen as a weak policy lever, but where this is the case we can take the opportunity to be creative and innovative at a grass roots level to create solutions that make sense to communities.

#### Sacred cows

- There is not universal high quality service provision in the industry. We need to deal with that in an honest way.
- We live in a predominantly adult focused society - *"Everything we do is mainly for adults and making it ok for kids afterwards"*
- Economic policy is given higher priority than social wellbeing.

#### Possible actions

- Public debate centred around strong recognition of importance of ECD in the community that results in widespread support for a high quality universal ECD system for 0-8 year olds
- Broader community understanding of lifelong impacts of ECD – *"The gift that keeps on giving"*
- Practical and useful knowledge about ECD to be shared amongst parents and the community to better enable community cohesion, support and child caring duties.
- A better, more joined up, job on quality and owning the fact that there is work to do there.
- The better translation of broader policy settings into application at local level.

#### Theme 2: How can we create ECD services and systems that work together for improved outcomes?

##### What are we doing well?

- There is a lot of alignment in terms of recognising common problems amongst different actors in the system



What are the challenges?

- We have a supply side mind set. We look at what we do we don't look at why people want to buy it.
- So much money is spent. *"We are not short of a quid. What we are doing is spending it very badly"*
- Many wonderful things are happening but they are pilots rather systemic.
- Lack of organisation
- "We can't service provide our way into the future...No one wakes up and thinks 'Fantastic, my case manager is dropping in today'".
- Collaboration requires convincing all the partners to part with their money. They need to have confidence that this will deliver outcomes.

## INTEGRATION



Questions

- We spend time on play theory, working out what is the most playable space for children and what space is played in most often? Why don't we apply this to ourselves? How easy is government making it for us to play together?
- Before consumer products are put into a market, a lot of effort goes in to making sure the consumer wants to buy it. What do we do in social services to make people want to pick up our package?

What change is required?

- To do anything useful we need to be relevant and engaged with families and parents in a way that they find rewarding
- We need to recognise that integration is not about being homogenous. It is about appearing as one, behaving as one but celebrating individuality and separateness

Sacred cows

- We talk about importance of relationships and relationship skills. But the system also needs to be more robust than relationships between individuals. It can't be dependent on people getting along or liking each other. It has to be more robust than that with strategies, structures, processes, cultures and accountabilities that foster relationships, not just personal connections.

Possible actions

- Making sure the funding matches the work. Government and philanthropic funding needs to keep pace with place based innovation, integrated delivery
- Funding for planning, infrastructure and gaps
- Invest in cost-benefit analysis of collaborative resources
- Umbrella organisations need to show case examples of what works

**Theme 3: How can we support families and communities to provide positive, safe and nurturing environments for their children?**

What are we doing well?

- Initiatives like Family by Family, which bring local families together to help each other, are an example of what works



What are the challenges?

- It takes time to build trust and to build the capacity of families and the professionals alongside them.
- We spend a lot of money mitigating harm, not addressing causality.

Questions

- What business do we have to decide who isn't providing a nurturing environment for our children?
- How do we stop undermining families?
- What is an evidenced based program to show support a positive environment for children?
- How do we leverage the many success stories?

What change is required?

- What people want to see is a greater involvement of families in their own destiny.

Sacred cows

- Because NGOs are reliant on funding, not raising their own money, they aren't in a position to innovate. They spend time writing tenders then going out to the community, rather than having a real conversation with them.

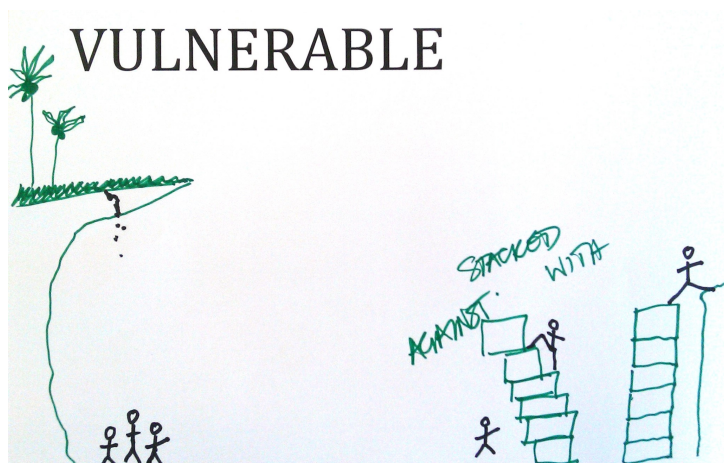
Possible actions

- For all organisations to employ staff locally from within the community they are working. It builds the capacity locally as well as supports the local economy and taps into existing trust based relationships.
- For Government to ensure that there is free access to early childhood education for all 4 year olds.

#### Theme 4: What could we do to engage families who are not reaching out to us?

What are we doing well?

- An example of what works is a playgroup which had 6 children participating. When a community member began to run it, the number of children enrolled instantly went to 21 children.
- Where someone is trusted, there is a quality of the relationship and they have the right personality, then that person has the respect of the community.



What are the challenges?

- Service providers have to work to a funder's expectations. They have to try to tick boxes and meet certain criteria whilst also building relationships. When a staff member is put in the situation of having to meet particular criteria, or follow a set process, it can create problems.
- There is disorganisation and constant reinventing of the wheel.
- We know what we need to do. It is a doing problem, not a thinking problem.
- Inclusion can be both positive and negative. It can mean 'only if you play it my way'.
- Being identified as 'vulnerable' can become a stigma - a box, brand, corner – for a community and for individuals.



## Questions

- Unless you are engaged with the people you are going to service, then what inroads are you going to make?

## What change is required?

- There needs to be understanding, respect, acceptance, trust, relationship building, support, patience, the sharing of stories, local knowledge and communication
- There is a role for people to be the link between the service that is on offer and the people that want the service.

## Sacred cows

- Many organisations aren't ready for change.
- Standardised programs don't necessarily work. It all depends on the quality of relationships.

## Possible actions

- (same as for Theme 3) For all organisations to employ staff locally from within the community they are working. It builds the capacity locally as well as supports the local economy and taps into existing trust based relationships.
- Change the focus of funding (and debate) to be on organisational competencies around developing the cultural capacity of frontline staff. Back end requirements need to be maintained, but they shouldn't be the driver.
- Organisational change needs to be done better, with greater investment in communications with and capacity building of frontline staff.
- There needs to be recognition and resourcing for new roles such as: community navigators; community researchers; and knowledge translators

### 4.3.3 ONGOING ACTIONS RESULTING FROM THE RETREAT

During the retreat, participants were asked to nominate actions they would like to work on with a sub-group of participants for the afternoon of Day Two and an early session before policy makers arrived on Day Three. A range of ideas were proposed, coalescing into five small working groups with five ideas. Each group was asked to work through:

- The difference they want to make
- A hypothesis for 'how' to make the difference
- Brainstorming of several solutions before picking one
- Sketching, as a prototype, what that solution would look like
- Create a plan with milestones for ongoing action beyond the retreat (next week, next month, next year)

In summary, the five ideas were:

1. Opening the ECD system to children and families, where they have a say in service design
2. Exploring the role of accountability and quality versus (personal) relationships in local level service delivery and whether there is a more effective way to create local ECD systems?
3. Incorporating and fostering community cohesion and connectedness into the ECD system – and finding ways to define and measure such components of 'quality' in the wider community.
4. A strategic united national communications strategy that builds public will and universal awareness around a child centred system and how critical it is for every child to be equipped with what they need to learn and thrive
5. Finding a way to shift the policy paradigm from an economic focus to a focus on children and families

Through the sessions working on the ideas, 2 ideas merged (national communications strategy and shifting the policy paradigm), another had enrolled more partners (opening the system to children and families), and 2 remained at an



exploration/conceptual level. Each group had the option of presenting their ideas to policy makers if they were ready two. Two groups chose to do so and have committed to actions beyond the retreat. These two ongoing actions were:

- A national campaign that creates a conversation about the importance of ECD and leads to action.
- Opening up systems to and learning from families and their children - through a Community Initiative on School Readiness

For the 'opening up systems' project, further work has already commenced. A more detailed description of the project is below.

### **The Project: Opening up systems to and learning from families and their children - through a Community Initiative on School Readiness**

#### **Partners:**

- Bev Book, Manager, Browns Plains & Satellite Early Years Centres & Kindergartens, The Benevolent Society (QLD)
- Rebecca Evans, Coordinator, HIPPY Palmerston, Good Beginnings Australia (NT)
- David Lilley, Director, The Hive Mt Druitt (NSW)
- Dana Shen, Director, Family by Family, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (SA)

**Purpose:** To address all (reworded) 4 themes from the AFP System Shift Retreat to trial a new initiative to make social change in view of the agreed fact we need to change what we are doing and include the voices of those we hope to assist:

- Theme 1: How can we increase the value society places on families and the development of their children before they go to school?
- Theme 2: How can we create ECD services and systems that work together for improved outcomes?
- Theme 3: How can we support families and communities to provide positive, safe and nurturing environments for their children?
- Theme 4: What could we do to engage families who are not reaching out to us?

**Method:** *"We are going to be bringing in the experts – the families and children".*

Each partner will investigate and collect data on responses from families and their children regarding the provision of a more effective method of providing transition to school programs. This will be done in their separate service delivery areas using assertive engagement, co-design and other methods. We will look at how these approaches and any feedback from families and their children can be built into the practices and outcomes for social service practitioners.

**Proposed Timeframe** (to be further considered in July):

- July: preparation - all partners to contribute suggested questions to form the basis of the data collection and decide the cohort numbers
- August - all partners to collect data
- September - analysis of data
- October - report on data and consider how to build in to practices and outcomes for social service practitioners.

In the final session of the retreat, participants were asked what they would personally commit to doing in the future. Examples of personal commitments that were mentioned include:

- (By a policy maker) opening the door to more regular conversations with not-for-profits
- (By a service provider) to visit more communities and allow others to come visit us
- (By a philanthropist) to convey the importance of ECD to other colleagues in philanthropy
- (By a local practitioner) to explore more systems theory at a practice level



## 4.4 OUTCOMES FROM STAGE THREE

The purpose of the initiative was never to duplicate other projects or to create a new institution. Its purpose was to complement existing work by bringing a diverse range of stakeholders together to find and build solutions that otherwise wouldn't be identified - in a time bound way. The intention was always that the individuals and organisations involved in the initiative would become equipped to independently (individually and in collaboration) drive change at both the organisational and system level, without the support of the Australian Futures Project.

While the proof will be in the long-term development of new skills, networks, and initiatives, we believe that this is the case – that the System Shift initiative has built leadership and capability to work differently together to improve outcomes for Australian children. This has included:

- **Thinking** in systems
  - Reconciling different understandings of the system in the Sponsor Group (via the eight 'givens')
  - Introducing systems concepts in the 'What we know' Discussion Paper
  - Generating new insights (and four themes) from 35 decision-maker interviews
  - Conducting system mapping exercises with participants at the June 2015 retreat
- **Designing** for impact in the context of complex adaptive systems
  - Co-designing the initiative with the Sponsor Group
  - Taking an iterative and consultative approach to each of the three stages
  - Conducting rapid prototyping with participants during the June 2015 retreat
- **Acting** for impact in the context of complex adaptive systems
  - New ongoing collaborative projects have arisen as a result of new connections made
  - New relationships have been forged across system actors and sectors
  - Individual agendas have been put aside in favour of collective leadership

We believe that over the course of the initiative, participants also built capacity in the Australian Futures Project priority areas:

- **Broad Leadership:** A wide range of Australians engage in a mature and respectful debate about the society they want Australia to become and the key steps we need to take to get there given our current situation and the global trends that are likely to shape the future
- **Active Contribution:** Citizens and organisations at all levels of society and across all sectors and disciplines contribute to a flourishing shared future and take accountability for the future Australia they are creating by their action and inaction, rather than relying on or blaming others
- **21st Century Competence:** Australians and Australian institutions at all levels have the necessary relationships, knowledge, skills, and experience to enable inspired leadership, informed decisions, and cross-sector action in a complex and fast-changing world
- **Functioning Relationships:** There are functioning relationships: between government, citizens, experts, media, and business; between politicians and bureaucrats; and between levels of government

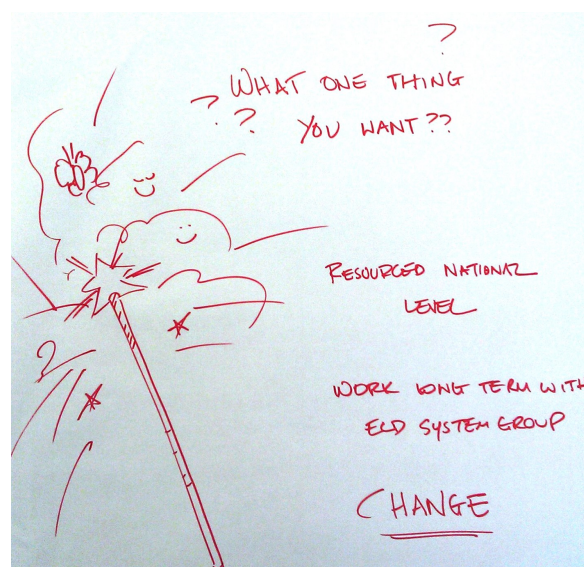


## 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR A SYSTEM SHIFT

What does all this mean for shifting the system? Given that so many of the challenges facing the system are adaptive (social and behavioural) rather than technical<sup>3</sup>, implications are presented below in terms of 'who needs to do what?' The findings from across the three stages of the System Shift initiative are summarised according to eight categories of actor:

- ECD service providers
- Policy makers
- Researchers
- Peak bodies
- Philanthropists
- Communities
- Parents, families and carers
- Taxpayers and society-at-large

It is emphasised here that, even though the actions are grouped, many will in fact require collective action dependent on shared effort and resourcing. This isn't just a job for governments. Comprehensive action to improve the ECD system in Australia is beyond the capacity of any single organisation or sector. All actors in the ECD system need to work better together. This requires leadership and courage. It requires challenging prevailing attitudes and mental models, disrupting existing patterns of 'doing things', embracing uncertainty, and allowing for innovation. It also requires long-term collective action rather than ad hoc flashes in the pan. The following are some starting points for a system shift.



### Actions for ECD service providers:

**Play well with others** – There needs to be more quality, cohesion and integration in the provision of services. In particular, ECD service providers need to reduce the level of territorialism between different organisations and disciplines. Developing alternative business models that don't completely rely on tenders and grants might help. Collaboration can pay for themselves where they leverage or pool existing funds.

**Nurture change within the organisation** – Service providers should reflect on the culture of the organisation and how this influences staff behaviour and the delivery of services. And change management isn't just for head office but needs to be applied across the workforce. Cultural change takes time. It requires:

- A compelling argument and vision
- Organisational learning programs
- Adequate performance measures and accountability
- Room for staff from across organisation (regardless of hierarchy) to become change champions

**Create non-threatening environments** – The need to work with parents in non-threatening environments to develop the skills required for appropriate parenting – to engage parents rather than alienating them – was a common theme. As was the need to find ways to involve children in the design of services. All this can be aided by the process of listening to

<sup>3</sup> Unlike 'technical' problems that are easily identified, adaptive challenges can be difficult to diagnose and solve. Responsibility for the solution often lies with 'followers' rather than an expert or leader. They are defined by their human dimensions, often requiring people to learn new ways of behaving or doing things – to adapt – in the face of uncertainty, whilst still building upon that from the past which should be preserved.



community, showing respect and curiosity, and regularly asking “what do you need?” It can also help to employ local people to work with local people. Creating locally appropriate environments require service design that is informed by and responsive to user experience. This includes being responsive to the needs of children with a disability. It does not mean stigmatising the vulnerable or less fortunate but rather being inclusive of difference.

#### Actions for policy makers:

**Adopt fit for purpose funding models** – Policy sets the context for much of the behaviour in the system. It isn’t rocket science. For service providers to be outcome-driven then funding also needs to be outcome-driven. For service providers to be open to new collaborative partnerships, the funding also needs to be available up-front to cover the costs of partnership building, as well as allow for multi-partner accountability structures. In some instances, taking competitive tendering out of the equation can help. And for services to be innovative, then funding needs to incentivise real innovation and allow for adaptive implementation and responsive design. A novel approach would be to allow local families to decide on successful tenders within their community.

**Ensure quality without homogenisation** – When it comes to ensuring quality, this shouldn’t come at the expense of diversity. The challenge is to create quality assurance systems and minimum standards that still allow for locally and culturally appropriate services. An important part of this will be developing more mature methods for measuring both quality and outcomes.

**Allow for independent oversight** – The financial flows within the ECD system are significant. They are also messy. The dual market and subsidy based context of ECD services, where government is essentially both one of the largest buyers of services as well as the rule setter, needs careful oversight. As with other sectors of the economy, it is worth considering whether or not stronger and more independent regulation is needed.

**Let evidence inform policy** – It is important that policy makers keep in touch with the evidence, including allowing what is working at the local level to inform funding and policy decisions. The challenge here is that there is a lack of evidence about what works in the Australian context. While there is some great data available, including that from the AEDC, a lot of data is not linked across agencies or state borders. Nor is it collected systematically from local level Australian case studies. There is an urgent need for more comprehensive data gathering, linkage and accessibility to inform both policy makers and practitioners.

#### Actions for researchers:

**Collate and evaluate data for best practice** – Researchers also have an important role to play in gathering and sharing data from Australian case studies. There is much work to be done deriving principles from successful local level initiatives and using this to develop best practice guidance. The evaluation of different approaches to ECD is lagging behind their implementation. In particular, there is need for the further evaluation of integrated service models for communities affected by social and economic disadvantage. Researchers could lead the work on establishing a new data collection system that monitors performance, participation and quality. This in turn could help drive better linking of practice and evidence. They could develop new indicators and measure that are focused on outcomes rather than outputs. This could include broader measures of a child’s wellbeing, and causal factors such as social cohesion and social capital.

#### Actions for peak bodies:

**Be a choir for change** – Improving public knowledge about and access to information on ECD will require a collective and national effort that is sustainable beyond election cycles. Consistent messaging is required on the value of ECD for the sake of child wellbeing and Australia’s future prosperity. Peak bodies can also make the case for investing in measures such as data collection to determine the most effective approaches and a highly trained (well paid) workforce



with opportunities for lifelong learning and development. Not every organisation has to sing from the same song sheet, but getting the choir together on occasion wouldn't hurt.

#### **Actions for philanthropists:**

**Provide room to move** – Philanthropists have a fair degree of freedom in what they choose to fund – at least relative to bureaucrats. They have the option of leveraging their funds to both move the system and provide others room to move. Three catalytic actions that philanthropy can take are to:

- Strategically support innovations that, due to their nature, would otherwise not be resourced
- Provide long-term (10 year) funding that allows for the true time it takes to deliver real change
- Invest in comprehensive strategies that include long-term implementation, community capacity building, and ongoing learning and adaptation, rather than short-term, ad hoc programs.

#### **Actions for communities:**

**Don't wait for permission** – Communities need to take ownership rather than wait for it to be granted. Community organisations are often best placed to implement local solutions but can be overlooked if they do not equip themselves to succeed. Just because something is local doesn't mean it can't be professional and have systems and standards in place as per larger organisations. Communities also need to be empowered to act. A lot of capacity building is still required at the community level to ensure that if and when ECD responsibilities are further devolved, these organisations can deliver. Creating capacity at the community level would, in many cases, overcome the need to scale up or down approaches, something which has been a struggle for many public and private sector service providers.

#### **Actions for parents, families, and carers:**

**Say what you need** – The strongest influence on children's development is not ECD services provided outside the home but rather the nature of the parent-child-relationships and the home learning environment. The ultimate responsibility of parents, families and carers to their children is to provide a positive, safe and nurturing environment. In some cases, this may require capacity building or greater awareness by parents of the importance of ECD, particularly for children of 2-3 years of age. Access to services is one fact. Participation is another. There are many services available that are not accessed by those that need them most. There are often very good reasons for non-participation, not least that the services aren't providing what is actually needed, in a way that is welcome. It isn't easy but, where possible, parents and carers need to have the courage to ask for help and say what they need. It is a two way street.

#### **Actions for taxpayers and society-at-large:**

**Value children** – The role and representations of children in society have differed over time, place and culture. What we are seeing in Australia today is a culmination of an increasing awareness of the importance of childhood not only for the future of the child, but for the future of the nation. Development in childhood has become a primary concern not only for parents and families but for governments. No longer the domain of a single sector (if it ever was), creating the conditions for better childhood development is inextricably linked to broader interventions into economy, environment, and society. If tax payers were more willing to value ECD more highly for its own sake and see it as a "common good" (rather than just focussing on the economic benefits) government might in turn be willing to support the necessary reforms to funding and institutional structures to promote greater cohesion, better service delivery and greater resources to pay for qualified and trained staff. Getting tax payers on board will require a shared narrative and common language across all the actors in the ECD system.



**Face the elephant** – We all need to face the elephant in the room. Early childhood education and care services, no matter how good they are, can only marginally compensate for family poverty and exclusion (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). While politically difficult, there is no escaping the impact that entrenched disadvantage and the widening gap between rich and poor has on Australia's children. Although attempts are being made to meet the needs of vulnerable children, intractable challenges persist that relate to broader economic and social policy. They also relate to wider problems that influence the home environment of the child, such as intergenerational unemployment and the lack of affordable housing. While there is much that can be done within the ECD system, there is much that can be undone by the perverse impacts of socio-economic disadvantage on a child's life. How (and if) we choose to address inequality is a question for society-at-large. The costs are clear but powerful champions for change are few.

## 6 LESSONS FOR RUNNING SOCIAL LABS

As explained above, the System Shift initiative was the first social lab run by the Australian Futures Project. Focused on ECD, it has taken a systems approach to building leadership and capability to work differently together to improve outcomes for children. For each Stage, we've included lessons and reflections to share.

From Stage One, we learnt:

- From initial one-on-one meetings in January 2013 through to the first official meeting of the whole Sponsor Group in September 2013 and finally the agreement on the project prospectus in June 2014, Stage One of the project took eighteen months. This is neither good nor bad. The process needs to move as fast as the system is able, but not faster. It is important not to leave individuals behind. It is necessary to observe what the system is ready to do and when. This can mean stopping and waiting, which can seem like lack of progress, but which pays off in the long-term. Patience is needed. An initiative like this takes a lot of time, even when there is good will and leadership. This was anticipated (and included in the prospectus).
- While not moving too fast, sometimes the convenors need to push ahead with agreed next steps, even in the face of individual resistance. Otherwise, there is a risk of letting individual agendas derail the process. So while there is a role for waiting, there is also a role for powering ahead and showing direction.
- It has not been easy keeping a voluntary coalition of partners together. People come in and out of the tent in a long process like this. That is to be expected. So long as a functional core is maintained, having the flexibility to let individuals opt in and out is a good idea. It allows for momentum to follow where appetite and energy exists for action.

In Stage Two, we also learnt good (and tough) lessons. Our reflections include:

- Asking genuinely open questions with curiosity helps make the invitation to be involved genuine too.
- It is important to keep revisiting and refining the original objectives and continually communicating them, even when it feels boring or laborious to do so.
- If the underlying agreement between the collaborative organisations falls apart, then you need to be willing to start all over again, not just gloss over it.

In Stage Three, a lot of lessons revolved around the retreat that was held. We have included here feedback from retreat participants based on a questionnaire we asked them to complete. Of 19 participants invited to take part, 8 completed the survey. Participants were asked a range of questions, including about the format of the retreat and whether or not it met its objectives. For example, participants were asked to comment on the following statements:

- I gained a deeper understanding of the range of perspectives and experiences of the ECD 'system'
- I have a clearer sense of the opportunities for change - at a systemic, organisational and individual levels
- I learnt something new about principles for effective implementation on the ground



- I feel motivated to act / behave differently in my work

The most positive results were around gaining a deeper understanding of the range of perspectives and experiences of the ECD 'system', and feeling motivated to act/ behave differently. This is consistent with written responses when participants were asked 'what was the best thing about the retreat?'. Responses included:

- Connecting with people from different locations who have different perspectives
- Having the space to think about the ECD world as a system and hanging out with new people – it was good fun
- The networking and connections
- Realising just how valuable our work is
- Gaining a working life time depth of understanding of system issues and drivers
- Spending time with a group of very experienced leaders in their areas of work
- Meeting new people and hearing a range of perspectives
- Meeting the policy makers

Participants provided feedback on the overall format of the event. The good news is that no respondent said that they were "bored and struggled to engage" for any session. Interestingly, the plenary sessions (either facilitated group discussion or presenting back to the whole group after small group work) didn't rate quite as highly as the small group work, reflection, or the unstructured time with peers.

Participants were also asked 'what's the one thing that would have made it more useful?' Two respondents would have liked more time with the policy makers. Another wanted more time to think about transformational system change and what this might look like. One suggested having an attendee who was from outside the ECD sector. Another felt that the retreat lacked a focus on inclusion and having rules about inclusive language may have helped this. Lastly, one respondent felt that the retreat didn't directly answer the question of why 22% of Australian children are not accessing Early Childhood Education and Care services.

It is worth noting that all the preparatory work before the retreat was really important. This was reflected in participant feedback where all participants found the pre-reading and preparatory phone calls before the retreat 'useful' or 'really useful'.

Further lessons learnt in Stage Three include:

- Taking time to explain the process to those that are unsure is worthwhile. Sceptics can sometimes become the most energetic contributors and solid supporters once they see the process working.
- Given the high value placed by participants on the unstructured time and reflection time that a residential retreat afforded them, it is apparent that the residential option paid off. Single day sessions are just not as effective as multi-day retreats for this type of process. The implication is that, if participants don't want to commit to more than one day, then it would probably be better not to have the event at all.
- Contrary to some advice we received, senior policy makers will participate if they are invited in an honest and open way and the Chatham House Rule is respected (that information shared during a meeting may be reported but not attributed). It is not clear whether or not the policy makers would have attended for longer if invited to do so – having not experienced this type of event before. However, after the event, at least two policy makers said they wished they had been there not only for the final day but also for the first two days to have deeper conversations with participants.
- The process may have been easier if we had guaranteed funding for the life of the project. As noted in the introduction, funding was never secure and had to be raised for each Stage of the initiative. However, lack of funding also meant we had to constantly innovate and forced us to create a lean agile process.
- Having tangible outcomes, such as discussion papers or a retreat, can be helpful for stakeholders looking for visible signs of progress.



Overall, our reflection is that the Social Lab was a worthwhile endeavour. We have run a process that has paid attention to the human dimensions of change, and hopefully contributed positively to an evolving area of practice. Where possible, we are already applying the lessons learnt in our ongoing work in other areas of the decision-making system. That said, we also recognise that a social lab is not something that can be done with a simple checklist or a recipe. It is by nature iterative, adaptive and indeed, imperfect. It has many layers of participant engagement and many aspects that defy simplistic concepts or solutions. It is also resilient in the face of complexity and has proven robust despite many internal and external challenges. At time it looked like an experiment that would not survive, but has surprised us by thriving when we least expected it. This is the beauty of creating a process that isn't controlled from the top or overly planned. It has the room to grow.



## ANNEX I: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS FROM STAGE THREE

### ACCESS

- How do you help families/children who don't have access in the first place?
- Where is the innovation around reaching low density/regional/remote communities where face-to-face access to services will always be low? How can we think differently about reaching these parents and families?
- How can we engage parents and children in a meaningful way that they find rewarding?
- Is bias a barrier to some children accessing early childhood education in Australia?

### ADVOCACY

- How do we make the case to stakeholders/supporters (usually of short term programs) that the solutions are long-term and adaptive? How do we bring them along with us when impacts might be slow to arise and adaptation is required?
- Can we have collective advocacy to change funding and servicing agreements of policy frameworks?
- How could we advocate the validity of collective impact approaches as a practice framework that has value?

### LOCAL LEVEL INNOVATIONS AND 'SATELLITES OF SUCCESS'

- How do we aggregate up the local level learnings?
- How can a program be scaled without losing its vision, influence and impact (the 'implementation science')?
- What can we learn from international successes?

### MEASUREMENT

- What data sets are key for great place based decision-making? How do we get them in place?
- How can we create different measurement tools that show the whole picture – more than ticking boxes or statistics?
- What mechanisms should be used in a collaborative approach for planning, governance and accountability across organisations (especially measurement systems and data sharing)?

### PATTERNS AND TRENDS

- Why is there such a difference between what people and systems say and what they end up doing?
- How does the culture of the organisations that we are working for/funding impact outcomes and staff self-determination?
- How can we replace a system that is based on (and requires a heavy investment in) trust between individuals - with one that is based on trust between organisations? What are the skills that support collaboration?

### SYSTEMIC STRUCTURES

- What are examples of new models of resource sharing or partnering with organisations that go beyond the usual suspects (and the usual grant making)?



- How do we resource what we know is required to achieve change – to work holistically with a community rather than across disparate programs?

## MENTAL MODELS AND PARADIGMS

- What would a major paradigm shift look like? What do we need to give up or change?
- How can we have a real conversation about shifting the system – and how can we work together to do so?
- Why are agendas for Aboriginal early childhood education determined by an elite top down approach? How could agendas for Aboriginal early childhood education (or any group) be determined by more bottom-up approaches?
- What examples are there of programs that have worked systemically and that have resulted in changes in the system?

## POLICY

- How can we translate key messages and with what voice do we speak to government?
- How can we create a 'safe to fail/adapt/innovate' space for policy makers?
- What are the barriers preventing public servants from doing more?
- How can we help each other? How can we meet in the middle?
- How might we link local work to system and policy change?
- How can we best explore with policy makers the system level changes that are required – not just today but as we discover them over time?
- How can government engage with NGOs and other providers in a more equal and meaningful way?
- Would it be useful to develop a joint statement with policy makers on long-term vision?



## ANNEX II: RETREAT PARTICIPANTS (2-4 JUNE 2015)

Those marked with an asterisk\* attended Day Three (Policy Session) only.

1. Tracy Beaton, A/Director, Office of Professional Practice, Department of Health & Human Services (VIC)\*
2. Bev Book, Manager, The Benevolent Society (Browns Plains & Satellite Early Years Centres & Kindergartens)
3. Anna Bowden, Operations and Development Manager, Nangala Project
4. Matthew Cox, Group Manager, Community Services Queensland, Australian Red Cross
5. Penny Dakin, Program Director, Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth
6. Rebecca Evans, Coordinator, HIPPY Palmerston, Good Beginnings Australia
7. Justin Files, Manager, Maari Ma Primary Health Service, Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corp
8. Sharon Fraser, General Manager, Go Goldfields (Central Goldfields Shire Council)
9. Kate Furst, A/Manager Social Policy, The Benevolent Society\*
10. Alan Green, General Manager, Early Years and Schools, Department of Education (TAS)\*
11. David Hardie, Program Officer, Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation\*
12. Paul Harkin, Regional Manager, Macarthur & Wingecarribee, The Benevolent Society
13. Katrine Hildyard MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier, Department of the Premier and Cabinet (SA)\*
14. David Lilley, Director, The Hive Mt Druitt
15. Michelle Lucas, Director, Opportunity Child (formerly remoteFOCUS, Ngaanyatjarra Lands, WA)
16. Deb Mann, Development Director, Ngroo Education Ltd
17. Penny Markham, National Lead, Social Inclusion, Goodstart Early Learning
18. Hayley Panetta, Project Development & Management, Minderoo
19. Rhiannon Newman, Research Officer to Katrine Hildyard MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier, Department of the Premier and Cabinet (SA)\*
20. Kirsty Nowlan, Executive Director Policy & Advocacy, The Benevolent Society\*
21. Bree Oliver, Policy Analyst, Education, Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy
22. Kirsten Ross, Executive Officer, The Blackwood Foundation\*
23. Sam Sayers, Director, ten20 Foundation
24. Dana Shen, Director, Family by Family, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation
25. Kate Simpson, CEO, Together SA
26. Trish Strachan, Executive Director, Office for Children and Young People, Department for Education and Child Development (SA)\*
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29. Carolin Wenzel, Media & PR Manager, The Benevolent Society\*
30. Karen Weston, Director, Early Learning and Development Reform, Department of Education and Training (VIC)\*
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### Facilitators

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